NEWS

Winchester School Committee adds 7% over 2025 budget

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The Winchester School Committee has voted to add another 7% to its budget, bringing the total to upwards of $70 million. COURTESY PHOTO

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The Winchester School Committee voted 4-1 last week to increase the district's level service budget by 7.15% to bring the newly proposed fiscal year 2026 budget total to $70,870,718.

School Committee member Michelle Bergstrom was the lone holdout, but not because she didn't support the increase – because she thought it wasn't enough.

The committee approved a preliminary level service budget in January that totaled $70,004,562.99, which was sent to the town manager and has been under review by the Finance Committee.

School Committee members said at the time there was more work to be done and expected the budget would increase before they voted a bottom line in March. Links to all the budget discussions, details and slide decks can be found at Finance & Operations — Winchester Public Schools.

At the March 20 meeting, Superintendent Dr. Frank Hackett presented the committee with two sets of budget recommendations that could have added just over $1 million to the original level funded budget.

The tier one or top priority recommendations included:

• Piloting literacy program and professional development materials – $300,000

• General professional development for literacy K-5 (not related to the pilot) – $100,000

• Data management and progress monitoring (with professional development) – $30,000

• Data warehouse and MTSS/progress monitoring system – $25,000

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Total of $455,000.

Tier two asks included:

• 2 full-time employees (FTEs) to address McCall schedule implementation – $162,480

• 2 FTEs/Literary specialists – $162,480

• 2.5 FTE/mathematics interventionist – $203,100

• Mathematics resources (exploring programs to pilot) –$25,000

• Professional development (K-12 excluding literacy) – $50,000

• Theatre program review – $20,000

Total of $623,060.

Hackett said his recommendation was to include the top tier only for a budget of $70,505,138, "which represents a 6.59% increase." He arrived at the additional recommendations in part through listening to educators and families via "ThoughtExchange," a survey tool.

"This is a big change in our process," he said. "It's just massive engagement that would be very difficult to get in any other way...we will continue to gather information from our community and staff in this way to help inform our decisions."

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Hackett noted the $300,000 for piloting literacy programs is somewhat a fluid number. The district is currently looking at seven programs, of which they will choose two to pilot, that cost anywhere from zero dollars to $500,000 to implement. He said they hope to have a better handle on the actual cost before Town Meeting in April.

Hackett also said he has "some level of confidence" there is a potential for outside funding to pay for some of the add-ons, such some professional development and the theatre program review.

So what's the issue?

School Committee members quickly agreed tier one recommendations be added to the budget's bottom line, but the tier two requests generated another hour of debate.

Hackett said if the committee was going to consider adding some of the tier two recommendations, he would prioritize the help to sort out the McCall Middle School schedule and the mathematics interventionists.

Committee member Tim Matthews said he thought they should add the McCall personnel and the math interventionists for an additional $820,580, put it before Town Meeting and tell them "this is our highest priority list," and see what happens.

Committee member Chris Nixon said he would be right there with Matthews, if it weren't for the fact they are in the middle of a collective bargaining year with all five school district contracts.

When Bergstrom said she thought it was important to signal to the community that everything in tiers one and two were important priorities, Matthews asked why they weren't including all of them.

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"This committee, I think historically, has done a really effective job, in some cases, of negotiating against itself," he said. "And I think what we need to really ask Town Meeting is what is the level of support around these things?"

Committee member Karen Maruyama Bolognese reminded her colleagues that Hackett and Finance Director Andrew Marron had been carefully working on a five-year funding plan. However, she would be in support of adding the $820,580, but not the whole ballgame.

Tom Hopcroft agreed the two line items were important and worth the town's investment.

Then things got muddy

Nixon made a motion to split the difference and add two FTEs as well as the top tier recommendations to the budget and allow Hackett to decide how best to utilize them, as math interventionists or at the McCall.

But Matthews offered an amendment to that motion to approve all of the top tier recommendations as well as 4 FTEs to address both issues fully.

Bergstrom then offered her amendment to Matthews' motion to include tier one and all tier two recommendations that would add a total of $1,078,060 the budget.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," she said. "If it's what we need, then we ask for it all. We don't piecemeal any of it."

Hopcroft said he thought it made better sense to find a compromise and thought Matthews motion was a reasonable place to land.

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To simplify the vote, Nixon withdrew his original motion and made a new one to reflect Matthews, which was then again amended by Bergstrom to include the $1 million+ in add-ons. When no one seconded Bergstrom's amendment, the vote on Nixon's motion was approved 4-1 with Bergstrom voting no.

The new budget will now go to the town manager and Finance Committee.

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